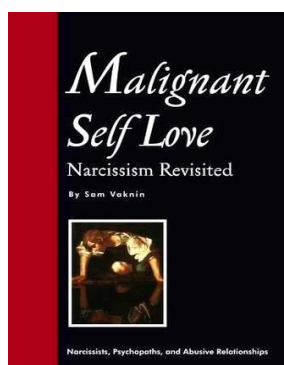


Pedophilia and Fetishism: Sexual Paraphilias

By: [Dr. Sam Vaknin](#)

[1. Pedophilia](#)

[2. Fetishism](#)



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1. Pedophilia

Pedophiles are attracted to prepubescent children and act on their sexual fantasies. It is a startling fact that the etiology of this paraphilia is unknown. Pedophiles comes from all walks of life and have no common socio-economic background. Contrary to media-propagated myths, most of them had not been sexually abused in childhood and the vast majority of pedophiles are also drawn to adults of the opposite sex (are heterosexuals).

Only a few belong to the Exclusive Type - the ones who are tempted solely by kids. Nine tenths of all pedophiles are male. They are fascinated by preteen females, teenage males, or (more rarely) both.

Moreover, at least one fifth (and probably more) of the population have pedophiliac fantasies. The prevalence of child pornography and child prostitution prove it. Pedophiles start out as "normal" people and are profoundly shocked and distressed to discover their illicit sexual preference for the prepubertal. The process and mechanisms of transition from socially acceptable sexuality to much-condemned (and criminal) pedophilia are still largely mysterious.

Pedophiles seem to have [narcissistic](#) and [antisocial \(psychopathic\)](#) traits. They lack [empathy](#) for their victims and express no remorse for their actions. They are in [denial](#) and, being [pathological confabulators](#), they rationalize their transgressions, claiming that the children were merely being educated for their own good and, anyhow, derived great pleasure from it.

The pedophile's ego-syntony rests on his [alloplastic defenses](#). He generally tends to blame others (or the world or the "system") for his misfortunes, failures, and deficiencies. Pedophiles frequently accuse their victims of acting promiscuously, of "coming on to them", of actively tempting, provoking, and luring (or even trapping) them.

The pedophile - similar to the [autistic patient](#) - misinterprets the child's body language and inter-personal cues. His social communication skills are impaired and he fails to adjust information gained to the surrounding circumstances (for instance, to the kid's age and maturity).

Coupled with his lack of empathy, this recurrent inability to truly comprehend others cause the pedophile to objectify the targets of his lasciviousness. Pedophilia is, in essence, auto-erotic. The pedophile uses children's bodies to masturbate with. Hence the success of the Internet among pedophiles: it offers disembodied, anonymous, masturbatory sex. Children in cyberspace are mere representations - often nothing more than erotic photos and screen names.

It is crucial to realize that pedophiles are not enticed by the children themselves, by their bodies, or by their budding and nubile sexuality (remember Nabokov's *Lolita*?). Rather, pedophiles are drawn to what children symbolize, to what preadolescents stand for and represent. With the advent of Feminism and [gender-equality](#), women have lost their traditional role as socially-acceptable and permissible sexual "child-substitutes" (except in Japan). This social upheaval may account for the rise in pedophilia across the world.

(continued below)

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To the pedophile ...

I. Sex with children is "free" and "daring"

Sex with subteens implies freedom of action with impunity. It enhances the pedophile's magical sense of [omnipotence](#) and [immunity](#). By defying the authority of the state and the edicts of his culture and society, the pedophile experiences an [adrenaline rush](#) to which he gradually becomes addicted. Illicit sex becomes the outlet for his urgent need to live [dangerously and recklessly](#).

The pedophile is on a quest to reassert control over his life. Studies have consistently shown that pedophilia is associated with anomic states (war, famine, epidemics) and with major life crises (failure, relocation, infidelity of spouse, separation, divorce, unemployment, bankruptcy, illness, death of the offender's nearest and dearest).

It is likely - though hitherto unsubstantiated by research - that the typical pedophile is depressive and with a borderline personality (low organization and fuzzy personal boundaries). Pedophiles are reckless and emotionally labile. The pedophile's sense of self-worth is volatile and dysregulated. He is likely to suffer from abandonment anxiety and be a [codependent or counterdependent](#).

Paradoxically, it is by seemingly losing control in one aspect of his life (sex) that the pedophile re-acquires a sense of mastery. The same mechanism is at work in the development of [eating disorders](#). An inhibitory deficit is somehow magically perceived as omnipotence.

II. Sex with children is corrupt and decadent

The pedophile makes frequent (though unconscious) use of projection and projective identification in his relationships with children. He makes his victims treat him the way he views himself - or attributes to them traits and behaviors that are truly his.

The pedophile is aware of society's view of his actions as vile, corrupt, forbidden, evil, and decadent (especially if the pedophiliac act involves incest). He derives pleasure from the sleazy nature of his pursuits because it tends to sustain his view of himself as "bad", "a failure", "deserving of punishment", and "guilty".

In extreme (mercifully uncommon) cases, the pedophile projects these torturous feelings and self-perceptions onto his victims. The children defiled and abused by his sexual attentions thus become "rotten", "bad objects", guilty and punishable. This leads to [sexual sadism](#), lust rape, and snuff murders.

III. Sex with children is a reenactment of a painful past

Many pedophile truly bond with their prey. To them, children are the reification of innocence, genuineness, trust, and faithfulness - qualities that the pedophile wishes to nostalgically recapture.

The relationship with the child provides the pedophile with a "safe passage" to his own, repressed and fearful, inner child. Through his victim, the pedophile gains access to his suppressed and thwarted emotions. It is a fantasy-like second chance to reenact his childhood, this time benignly. The pedophile's dream to make peace with his past comes true transforming the interaction with the child to an exercise in wish fulfillment.

IV. Sex with children is a shared psychosis

The pedophile treats "his" chosen child as an object, an extension of himself, devoid of a separate existence and denuded of distinct needs. He finds the child's submissiveness and gullibility gratifying. He frowns on any sign of personal autonomy and regards it as a threat. By intimidating, cajoling, charming, and making false promises, the abuser isolates his prey from his family, school, peers, and from the rest of society and, thus, makes the child's dependence on him total.

To the pedophile, the child is a "transitional object" - a training ground on which to exercise his adult relationship skills. The pedophile erroneously feels that the child will never betray and abandon him, therefore guaranteeing "object constancy".

The pedophile – stealthily but unfailingly – exploits the vulnerabilities in the psychological makeup of his victim. The child may have low self-esteem, a fluctuating sense of self-worth, primitive defence mechanisms, phobias, mental health problems, a disability, a history of failure, bad relations with parents, siblings, teachers, or peers, or a tendency to blame herself, or to feel inadequate (autoplastic neurosis). The kid may come from an abusive family or environment – which conditioned her or him to expect abuse as inevitable and "normal". In extreme and rare cases – the victim is a masochist, possessed of an urge to seek ill-treatment and pain.

The pedophile is the guru at the center of a cult. Like other gurus, he demands complete obedience from his "partner". He feels entitled to adulation and special treatment by his child-mate. He punishes the wayward and the straying lambs. He enforces discipline.

The child finds himself in a twilight zone. The pedophile imposes on him a shared psychosis, replete with persecutory delusions, "enemies", mythical narratives, and apocalyptic scenarios if he is flouted. The child is rendered the joint guardian of a horrible secret.

The pedophile's control is based on ambiguity, unpredictability, fuzziness, and [ambient abuse](#). His ever-shifting whims exclusively define right versus wrong, desirable and unwanted, what is to be pursued and what to be avoided. He alone determines rights and obligations and alters them at will.

The typical pedophile is a micro-manager. He exerts control over the minutest details and behaviors. He punishes severely and abuses withholders of information and those who fail to conform to his wishes and goals.

The pedophile does not respect the boundaries and privacy of the (often reluctant and terrified) child. He ignores his or her wishes and treats children as objects or instruments of gratification. He seeks to control both situations and people compulsively.

The pedophile acts in a patronizing and condescending manner and criticizes often. He alternates between emphasizing the minutest faults (devalues) and exaggerating the looks, talents, traits, and skills (idealizes) of the child. He is wildly unrealistic in his expectations – which legitimizes his subsequent abusive conduct.

Narcissistic pedophiles claim to be infallible, superior, talented, skillful, omnipotent, and omniscient. They often lie and confabulate to support these unfounded claims and to justify their actions. Most pedophiles suffer from cognitive deficits and reinterpret reality to fit their fantasies.

In extreme cases, the pedophile feels above the law – any kind of law. This grandiose and haughty conviction leads to [criminal acts](#), [incestuous](#) or polygamous relationships, and recurrent friction with the authorities.

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V. The pedophile regards sex with children as an ego-booster

Subteen children are, by definition, "inferior". They are physically weaker, dependent on others for the fulfillment of many of their needs, cognitively and emotionally immature, and easily manipulated. Their fund of knowledge is limited and their skills restricted. His relationships with children buttress the pedophile's twin grandiose delusions of omnipotence and omniscience. Compared to his victims, the pedophile is always the stronger, the wiser, the most skillful and well-informed.

VI. Sex with children guarantees companionship

Inevitably, the pedophile considers his child-victims to be his best friends and companions. Pedophiles are lonely, erotomaniac, people.

The pedophile believes that he is in love with (or simply loves) the child. Sex is merely one way to communicate his affection and caring. But there are other venues.

To show his keen interest, the common pedophile keeps calling the child, dropping by, writing e-mails, giving gifts, providing services, doing unsolicited errands "on the kid's behalf", getting into relationships with the preteen's parents, friends, teachers, and peers, and, in general, making himself available (stalking) at all times. The pedophile feels free to make legal, financial, and emotional decisions for the child.

The pedophile intrudes on the victim's privacy, disrespects the child's express wishes and personal boundaries and ignores his or her emotions, needs, and preferences. To the pedophile, "[love](#)" means enmeshment and clinging coupled with an overpowering separation anxiety (fear of being abandoned).

Moreover, no amount of denials, chastising, threats, and even outright hostile actions convince the erotomaniac that the child not in love with him. He knows better and will make the world see the light as well. The child and his guardians are simply unaware of what is good for the kid. The pedophile determinedly sees it as

his or her task to bring life and happiness into the child's dreary and unhappy existence.

Thus, regardless of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the pedophile is convinced that his feelings are reciprocated - in other words, that the child is equally infatuated with him or her. He interprets everything the child does (or refrains from doing) as [coded messages](#) confessing to and conveying the child's interest in and eternal devotion to the pedophile and to the "relationship".

Some (by no means all) pedophiles are socially-inapt, awkward, [schizoid](#), and suffer from a host of [mood](#) and anxiety disorders. They may also be legitimately involved with the child (e.g., stepfather, former spouse, teacher, gym instructor, sibling) - or with his parents (for instance, a former boyfriend, a one night stand, colleagues or co-workers). They are driven by their all-consuming loneliness and all-pervasive fantasies.

Consequently, pedophiles [react badly](#) to any perceived rejection by their victims. They turn on a dime and become dangerously [vindictive](#), out to destroy the source of their mounting frustration. When the "relationship" looks hopeless, some pedophiles violently embark on a spree of self-destruction.

Pedophilia is to some extent a culture-bound syndrome, defined as it is by the chronological age of the child involved. Ephebophilia, for instance - the exclusive sexual infatuation with teenagers - is not considered to be a form of pedophilia (or even paraphilia).

In some cultures, societies and countries (Afghanistan, for instance) the age of consent is as low as 12. The marriageable age in Britain until the end of the nineteenth century was 10. Pedophilia is a common and socially-condoned practice in certain tribal societies and isolated communities (the Island of Pitcairn).

It would, therefore, be wise to redefine pedophilia as an attraction to or sexual acts with prepubescent children or with people of the equivalent mental age (e.g., retarded) in contravention of social, legal, and cultural accepted practices.

The committee that is writing the next edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) is considering to render hebephilia (when adults are sexually attracted to teenagers around the time of puberty) a subtype of pedophilia and to rename it pedohebephilia.

“The rows over hebephilia and paraphilic coercive disorder aren't academic, because 20 US states have passed laws that allow sex offenders who have served their sentences to be detained indefinitely in a secure hospital if they are deemed "sexual predators" ([New Scientist, 24 February 2007, p 6](#)). This can only be done if the offenders have a psychiatric disorder that increases their risk of reoffending - which few do, according to DSM-IV. (A critic) says that if hebephilia and paraphilic coercive disorder make it into DSM-V, they

will be seized upon to consign men to a lifetime of incarceration.” (New Scientist, “Psychiatry’s Civil War”, December 2009)

2. Sexual Fetishism: The Object is Desire

The sexual fetish is like "the fetich in which the savage sees the embodiment of his god"

S. Freud, "Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex" (1905)

A. The Disorder

The propensity to regard and treat other people (caregivers, parents) as objects (to "objectify" them) is an inevitable phase of personal development and growth during the formative years (6 months to 3 years). As psychoanalysis and the [Object Relations school of psychology](#) teach us, we outgrow this immature way of relating to our human environment and instead develop a sense of [empathy](#).

Yet, some of us remain "fixated" and do not progress into full-fledged adulthood. Arguably the most ostentatious manifestation of such retardation is the sexual paraphilia known as fetishism.

There are three types of fetishes:

- I. An [inanimate object](#), usually with a sexual connotation (such as a bra);
- II. A **body part** that is clearly still connected to a complete body, dead or alive (e.g., hair, feet);
- III. A **reified trait**, usually a deformity or idiosyncrasy that implies inferiority, helplessness, or dependence (for instance, a lame, or grotesquely obese, or hunchbacked person).

Consequently, there are three categories of fetishism and fetishists:

- I. **Objective fetishists**, for whom the inanimate fetish stands for and symbolizes a desired whole that is out of reach;
- II. **Somatic fetishists**, for whom the body part stands for and symbolizes a coveted human body (and, by extension, a relationship) that is unattainable;
- III. **Abstract fetishists**, who latch on to a trait or a characteristic as a means to indirectly interact with their "defective" bearer and thus fulfill the fetishist's [grandiose fantasies](#) of omnipotence and innate superiority ([pathological narcissism](#)).

Arguably, people who prefer autoerotic, partialist, necrophilic, coprophilic, urophilic, or anonymous sex are also fetishists with the fetish being their own bodies or the organs or excretions of their sex partners.

Sexual fetishism is predicated on a pathological sexual attachment to a fetish. The fetishist climaxes only in the presence of the fetish and cannot reach orgasm otherwise. In the absence of their fetish, most fetishists are sexually dysfunctional (for instance, they suffer from erectile dysfunction or are sexually hypoactive). Some forms of fetishism involve sado-masochistic and domination/submission fantasies (with fetishes such as feet or boots and shoes).

The circumstances surrounding the sexual encounter are immaterial to the fetishist, as is his environment. Thus, a fetishist who is fixated on bras or feet is unlikely to mind the physical characteristics of the proprietress of either.

This "tunnel vision" is common to other mental health disorders, such as the [autistic spectrum](#), schizophrenic, or somatoform ones. It may indicate the existence of underlying mental health problems or traumas that either give rise or exacerbate fetishism.

Fetishism can be confined to recurrent and intense fantasies and urges, or acted upon (behavioral). It invariably involves masturbation. The fetishist interacts with his fetish in five ways: by watching it (worn by a sex partner or as an isolated item); by holding it; by rubbing it or against it; by smelling it; and by vividly fantasizing about it.

B. Etiology

The fetish has to be "exactly right" in smell, texture, and appearance. Fetishists often go to great length to make sure that their fetish is just "the way it should be". It would seem that fetishes are "triggers", akin to objects that provoke flashbacks and panic attacks in the [post-traumatic stress disorder](#). It stands to reason, therefore, that the same mental mechanism gives rise to both: association of learning.

Memory has been proven to be [state-dependent](#): information learnt in specific mental, physical, or emotional states is most easily recalled in similar states. Conversely, in a process known as redintegration, mental and emotional states are completely invoked and restored when only a single element is encountered and experienced (a smell, a taste, a sight).

In 1877, the French psychologist Alfred Binet (1857-1911) suggested that fetishism is the outcome of a repeated co-occurrence of an object (the fetish) and sexual arousal. The more frequent the association, the more entrenched, persistent,

and enhanced it becomes (i.e., the stronger the allure of the fetish and the more secure its exclusivity as a modus of sexual expression).

Behaviorist psychologists largely concurred with Binet, though they preferred to use the term "conditioning", rather than "association". Others (Wilson, 1981) suggested that fetishism is nothing but faulty imprinting. Yet, imprinting has never been demonstrated in humans and fetishists, whatever we may think of their predilections, are human beings.

Fetishes gain in strength when other avenues of sexual gratification are not available owing to extreme shyness, fear of sex, a physiological dysfunction, or socio-cultural inhibitions. Thus, fetishism should be more prevalent in sexually repressive cultures and societies and among women, homosexuals, and other sexual minorities. Yet, fetishism has been noted mostly among men, both homosexual and heterosexual. The phenomenon may go under-reported among women, though.

Western society encourages what the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld called "partial attractiveness". Women are taught to emphasize certain organs and areas of their body, particular fashion accessories and clothing items, and [gender-specific traits](#). These serve as "healthy and socially-acceptable fetishes" to which males respond.

Other "explanations" of fetishism are so convoluted that they either defy reason or cannot be regarded as science by any stretch of the word. Thus, Freud suggested (Standard Edition, Vol. 21, pp. 147-157, 1927) that fetishism is the outcome of an unresolved castration anxiety in childhood. The fetishist attempts to ward off the lingering stress by maintaining unconsciously that women are really possessed of an occult penis and are, thus, made "whole". Fetishes, in other words, are symbolic representations of phalli.

In his article "Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense" (Standard Edition, Vol. 23, pp. 275-8), Freud offered yet another mechanism. He postulated that the fetishist's Ego harbors two coexistent, fully functional, and hermetically sealed "attitudes" towards external reality: one taking the world into account and the other ignoring it.

Adherents of the Object Relations school of psychodynamics, such as Donald Winnicott, consider fetishes to be "transitional objects" that outgrew their usefulness. The fetish originally allowed the child to derive comfort and compensate for the withdrawal of the Primary Object (the mother, or caregiver). Winnicott, too, believes that the fetish amounts to an anxiety-ameliorating substitute for the missing maternal phallus.

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